

A summer of exploration and innovation

by BROCK WEIR

School's out for summer and, for many kids across our communities, it's a carefree time to make memories before academic reality once again appears on the horizon.

When I was a youngster, it often felt like just about anything could be accomplished during the summer break. Perhaps goal-setting at the time was a bit less ambitious than it is today; perhaps it's because time appears to be going by at an ever-faster clip. These factors aside, at that age you knew you'd be set to return to the classroom in September with at least one fun thing to share in the fall when faced with that perennial question, "What did you do on your summer vacation??"

With two working parents, extended vacations while I was still in elementary school were almost invariably out of the question. I was fortunate enough to be offered a week here and there at stay-away camp, but this never materialized, the fault lying squarely at my feet. From a lack of confidence, a muted enthusiasm when it came to the great outdoors at that snapshot in time, and even being at a point where I didn't quite yet have my own sense of self, I steadfastly refused to leave my "bubble" and I regret it.

Thankfully, these aren't earth-shattering regrets, but they're regrets nonetheless.

My parents, however, were not content to let me stay home for months on end. Day camps were the order of the day, and, although I took to each of them with varying degrees of enthusiasm, they were great ways to spend the summer and make new memories.

Look, I was never going to be an athlete, despite my parents somehow thinking sending me to sports camps would have the same impact as French Immersion has on picking up another language, but they kept me moving, busy and having fun.

But, truth be told, if it wasn't for those rare days where we had field trips as close to home as a local recreation centre for an afternoon of swimming or as far afield as a bus trip down to Toronto to soak in some culture, things would have been considerably more mind-numbing.

A walk-through of CBC's Toronto studios, for instance, opened many eyes wide to the possibilities of a career in journalism, broadcasting or showbiz - all becoming more real if you happened to bump into the likes of Peter Mansbridge or members of the late lamented Royal Canadian Air Farce going about their workday, never too busy to stop for a friendly hello.

A tour of the Legislature drove home civic pride, a trip to Casa Loma was a memorable destination that instilled a bit of Disney magic close to home, but as wonderful as those experiences were, one of my favourite places to visit was invariably the Ontario Science Centre.

Science was never one of my favourite subjects in the classroom, at least until high school, but in this environment, everything was just more comprehensive, engaging, and fun - all in a setting that was uniquely its own.

How unfortunate it is for kids who were looking forward to spending their holidays at day camps run out of that iconic setting this sultry season that the Ontario Government made the decision last week to permanently shutter the Science Centre, citing structural concerns with portions of the roof.

How unfortunate it is for parents as well who thought they had everything aligned for their kids for a brilliant summer of fun and learning only to be left scrambling for alternatives at the eleventh hour. A full reimbursement of their camp fees, I can imagine, was only the most minute of consolations.

In last week's announcement, the Province said that the venerable landmark, which the Ford government had previously announced

would be rebuilt on a portion of the Ontario Place site, would only be safe for occupancy through to the middle of the fall. This was reiterated by Ontario Infrastructure Minister Kinga Surma on Monday that it was 'hoped' the Centre would remain open until the new one was built, but necessary repairs were too costly.

'The engineers were quite specific when we spoke to them that if we were to do work on the roof, we should replace the roof in its entirety and the building would have to be closed through that period of time, two to five years, just for the roof alone,' said Surma in a June 24 press conference in comments relayed by CP24.

The same report noted a full roof replacement could run the Province between \$22 million and \$50 million, with the Province arguing it would have cost nearly \$500 million to bring the entire building, infrastructure and all, back up to snuff.

But how could things have deteriorated to this point?

The Ontario Science Centre, on its present site, was Ontario's gift to itself to mark the Centennial of Confederation, with construction finishing up just in time for 1967.

Its original tagline was, 'Come see what would happen if Albert Einstein and Walt Disney had gotten together?' a slogan with perennial relevance if I've ever heard one.

One can only wonder what those two gentlemen would have thought seeing the slow decay of a facility designed to marry their respective bailiwicks of science and imagination.

But decay it has, and despite a brief glimmer of hope that it was here to stay when the Province announced the latest subway extension, the Ontario Line, would terminate at a stop aptly named for the Science Centre, there appears to be no turning back.

Litres of ink could be spilled on speculation as to why now has been deemed the time to close the Ontario Science Centre, both politically and practically, but, in my view, it's indicative of the respect this Province has for its built heritage, particularly historic buildings that haven't quite crossed the arbitrary timeline we seem to collectively measure the historic value of such assets.

As I wrote last week, this needs to change across the country ? and the decline and fall of the Ontario Science Centre is just the latest example of why.

In recent years, Canada Day has been as much of a time for celebration as it has been for walking a path for reconciliation and addressing our collective history, both good and bad.

We've come a long way as a country and letting historic examples of our ingenuity, thirst for knowledge, and drive to find harmony with the environment wither on the vine is best avoided.

Will a new Science Centre on the shores of Lake Ontario continue to fulfil the mandate of its now-predecessor? Only time will tell, but if it is intended to be a catalyst for a revitalized waterfront, a renewed interest in science for potential scientists of tomorrow, a showcase for the scientific and technological achievements this country has achieved through its nearly 157 years of existence, and will continue to achieve for generations to come, one can only wish for its success and hope it is given the respect it deserves.